



# KATHMANDU YOUR KATHMANDU

KAMAL P. MALLA

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## THE TWO LANDSCAPES

Kathmandu is an absurd city. The absurdity of Kathmandu, the capital of the world's only Hindu kingdom, is both physical and metaphysical. The physical absurdity of the capital is in the deep incongruity between the beauty of its natural landscape and the ugliness of its human habitations. The metaphysical absurdity of Kathmandu is in the wide incongruity between the primitive, animistic and elemental simplicities of the rest of the kingdom and the pseudo-civilization of the capital. Perhaps in the whole kingdom nature has been nowhere more generous than in the Valley of Kathmandu. The climate of the Valley is nearly perfect: high up from the blazing malarious plains, but fairly below the snow-line. Except winter and a little rough weather Kathmandu has no other meteorological obsessions. Nobody dies of the sun-stroke and no human habitations are washed away by ferocious rivers. Above all, the Kathmandu sky is never dull and flat. When there is nothing to engage you right and left, the sky holds out a prospect of a dramatic gradation of the Mediterranean blue converging on the liquid horizon of the folding layers of the mountains. Receding in the background are the peaks of gold, silver and ruby, depending upon the time of the day and the angle of the light in which the peaks are bathed. There is nothing so much as dull and grey in the Kathmandu landscape if only one could step up some hundred feet above the human habitations to look around. If the pervasive colour washing the whole landscape is not liquid blue, it is bright silver, and if it is not silver it is deep gold. The opulence of Nature, refulgent in light and shade, in green and gold, becomes more and more pronounced as we move away further and further from the city centres. In every centrifugal direction from the

municipal area lies an outskirt not yet overrun by civilization. Somewhere between the municipal area of Kathmandu and its adjoining outskirts lie the fatal borders between the purity of man before the fall and his depravity since he ate the forbidden fruit. Not only that the outskirts are more neat and healthy, but these places are also in a closer harmony with the surrounding natural landscape. These places have subtle and meaningful touches of the deep interior of the country.

On all six days a week the adjoining areas of Kathmandu are safe. They are safe so long as the weekend picnic parties do not wish to open another Pandora's Box, letting all the civilized beasts out of their plastic bags, and desert the place with ripples of transistorized music. Kathmandu, among other things, is a sprawling city, bursting at all the sub-urban seams accessible to the asphalt roads of one sort or another. More and more green fields are mowed down, more and more open spaces are overrun. Even the secretive walls of the Rana compounds are coming down. In their places buildings of one sort or another are coming up at the rate of one a day. The affluence of Kathmandu is manifest. It is manifest, not only in the window-shopping and cement pavements—all refulgent in phosphorescent illuminations, but also in sub-urbia where pseudo-smart bungalows are cropping up—many of them in the form of brick edifices plastered with cement and painted with garish colours of all shades. In fact, for nearly a century Kathmandu has been encircled by numerous pockets of civilization which flourished behind the lofty walls of the Rana mansions. The truth, however, was that before the deluge of the 1950s the people on either side of the brick curtain communicated very little. Now that we have survived the deluge, the walls are coming down, the mansions stand exposed, the plasters are peeling off, and the roofs are thick with weeds. At least such are the ravages of time wherever the foreign saviours, embassies, missions, hospitals and hotels are not housed. The patriarchial

on the traffic islands where the chivalric Ranas rode upon bronze horses. They also built a large number of edifices with rhetorical Gothic colonnades or pseudo Greco-Roman motifs, like the Gaddi Baithak, Military Hospital, Bir Hospital, Tri-Chandra College, Durbar High School; to these were later added glib structures like Saraswati Sadan and the Police Station. Of all these public buildings the most pretentious one is the Gaddi Baithak. This was where the few state visitors to the Rana Court were ceremonially received during the last fifteen years of the regime. The architectural affectations of the regime are eloquent in the very location of this building: it is imposed upon the heart of a unique square in the whole city, the Durbar Square. With its tall colonnade fronts the Gaddi Baithak appears completely out of place, standing out as a freakish lapse in a chain of buildings with a distinct and indigenous character. One can come across buildings like the Gaddi Baithak in any part of the world, from say Calcutta to Timbuctoo. But the ancestral buildings like the House of Kumari, the south western front of the Hanuman Dhokha Durbar can be found only in the Valley of Kathmandu. The Ranas also contributed their share of vandalism to the Durbar Square by plastering the fine polished brick buildings with lime and mortar. In the whole Square only one building stands now in its original exterior. It is the nine-storied palace of Pratap Malla, also called the Basantpur Palace. The Gaddi Baithak and the Basantpur Palace stand side by side in the heart of Kathmandu, not only representing the two styles of architecture, but also symbolizing the two incongruous worlds of values.

#### THE DISDAINING REPOSE

In an excursion to a city, to begin with architecture is to begin with the most obvious. Architecture is not just a style of building. Architecture or the style of the buildings where a people live, is often an index, as in the case of the Ranas, to what they live by. In

Kathmandu the lyrical and dramatic qualities of the natural landscape surrounding the city, throw the city's architectural incongruities into painful contrast. Here the generosity of Nature is oppressive, because the city falls apart at all seams in the face of the more meticulous and discriminating harmony of Nature. It is as if the human affectations appear less real and human than the solid walls of green and gold, the dramatic canopy of blue and orange. Kathmandu does not hold together as a symbol or a metaphor. Only the ugliness of the city acquires a sharp definition because here Nature is in a better form than elsewhere; here men are more pretentious than elsewhere in the kingdom. As we lose our ways in the old parts of the city, struggling through a maze of dark, slimy and narrow lanes, jammed with vehicular traffic of all sorts—the stone age pram co-exists here with the space age limosines, we forget all the oppressiveness of Nature. Except a narrow strip of sky Nature ceases to matter thereafter. What compel our attention are the details and didacticism of the man-made town. Here the incongruity is not so much between the beauty of Nature and the ugliness of the human habitations as between the disdainful repose of art and the bewildering details of the surrounding material squalor. It is in this labyrinth that one realizes that Kathmandu was never built; it just grew up like weeds. That is why the city takes the knowledgeable tourist perpetually by surprise. He can never tell what next he may bump into after drifting along for a five-minute distance from a golden pagoda. The old city abounds in the deposits of time—groaning buildings with beautifully carved but rotting verandas, temples and pagodas in disrepair, cracking door-frames with exquisite details, places of worship with obscene terracotta. It is the art in ruins and disarray, the islands of symmetry in the thick of fuming slums and green gutters, the harmony in bronze and stone thick with pious scum that unnerve every outsider in Kathmandu. Amidst such



a mighty confusion of holy cows and mangy dogs, elusive men and markets, suffocating traffic and pedestrians, stubborn street-venders and obscure holes suddenly there is an island of calm and order, repose and harmony—the work of an unknown artist or artists who betrayed their disdain everywhere in stone, wood and metals. Their disdain is eloquent in every inch of the exterior detail which is subjected to the most exacting concern for texture and symbolism. Each building or pagoda is a triumphant solution of the problems of space and scale, mass and proportion, details and perspective, parts and the whole. The windows, the doors, the beams, the posts, the capitals, the balconies announce not only the artist's triumph over stone, metal and wood, but also his triumph over the chaos of teeming symbols and details. Yet today each classical Nepalese abode is merely an island disdaining its own environment, neither enriching nor enriched. In Kathmandu the golden pagodas float upon the entrails of the fuming city like Noah's Ark. Each ancient pagoda in the heart of Kathmandu appears as a sad imposition upon the teeming labyrinth of mercantile slums: the golden pagoda in the heart of obscure holes displaying tooth-pastes and cabbages with an equal religiosity.

#### A XANADU IN THE MAKING

Evidently, the most distinctive feature of Kathmandu is its architecture both in its chief glories and pious follies. While the chief glories like the Basantpur Palace and the Durbar Square are in steady ruins, the architectural follies of the city are multiplying. Most unlikely state buildings and monuments are rising in Kathmandu: the Martyrs' Memorial, the Town Hall, the Central Telegraphic Office, the General Post Office, the Academy, the Mint, the Bureau of Mines, the Supreme Court, the National Archives, the NIDC Office, the Police Club, the Warehouse and so on. But the bemused tourist is bewildered at his inability to distinguish one from

the other. Except the Cottage Industries Emporium these buildings are in no way different from the public utility buildings like the Saraswati Sadan or the Police Station built by the Ranas before the 1950s. At this steady pace soon Kathmandu will be an unenviable wilderness of reinforced concrete buildings, a lesser Xanadu where the descendants of Changhis Khan might have hunted for a roof over their heads. Because by now the city plebians too have cultivated the cheap taste for plastering their aging mansions with cement. The engineers, draughtsmen and architects are also showing a soft corner for architectural patriotism by curving the roof-corners of otherwise unearthly structures. While this craze for humourless reinforced concrete buildings rages in the Nepalese capital a great many of the *locus classicus* of Nepalese architecture, including the Basantpur Palace and the Durbar Square, are steeped in the slimy public urinals. The ancient Nepalese propensity to fuse the sublime and the sordid is irresistible. While our ancestors built the temples of delicate symmetry supported by the beams teeming with erotic details, we fulfil our animal urges by pissing at their foot. It is not shocking if the ancient royal palace in Patan is used to house the city police. In these matters Kathmandu has always been ahead of Patan: Kathmandu is only a step further in its *avant garde* vandalism.

#### A TRAGIC INSTITUTION OF BABYLON

The Nepalese have not gone much further since the deluge, except in the glossy brochures of the Department of Tourism and the Publicity Department documentaries. In the meantime, tired of the computerised wisdom of the West tourists of one sort or another are pouring down at the Gaucher Airport. But as soon as they drive down to the city office of the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation they are disenchanted. The mythic Shangrila, the forbidden city which a great many tourists obstinately hope to find in Kathmandu, is being swallowed by the

its consummate perfection Kathmandu will groom a trinity of casualties, intelligence, sensibility and articulateness, to be crucified on the shop-windows displaying all the new-fangled wares from Hongkong to Helsinki.

#### THE UNLIKELY OFFSPRING OF THE HINDU SOCIETY

In the meantime, the shop-keepers display their wares; the clerks stick to their desks, the elite to their pavements. While the impious go to the Hindi movies the pious continue to pray at the Hindu temples. From the sanitation point of view every Kathmandu street is a nightmare, but there is invariably a chorus of radios blaring in full blast round the clock, no matter whether it is the Hindu hymn or the sentimental Hindi film-songs. There is invariably a wide stretch of public wall displaying the natural history of Hindi movies in ugly, loud and gaudy posters. In a sense, Kathmandu is metaphysically steeped in Hindu lore. The city priests and patricians are spiritually enchanted by the higher mythology of the *Vedas*, the *Upnishads*, the *Puranas*, the *Gita* and the epics; the plebians are mentally addicted to the lower mythology of the appetizing Hindi filmdom. In this confused anatomy of Kathmandu's Hindu society run arteries of alien blood which provoke the prodigal Hindu youth to dress tighter and tighter, wear shorter and shorter skirt, dance to wilder and wilder beats of the brass, and drink more and more exotic cocktails. The transistor-carrying, picnic-minded, twist-obsessed, Hollywood-sinister gangs of Kathmandu's youth eat a crazy salad in expensive restaurants and every midnight fly past the dark alleys of Kathmandu at a record speed. This unlikely offspring of a Hindu society is on the tide, and its hedonist delinquency is an insidious commentary upon the inadequacies of the Hindu upbringing. The *mlecchha*-detesting xenophobia of the Hindu parents is visiting upon their children with a vengeance. In such a context, the Hindu piety of the *Gorkhapatra*

editorial reads as a verbal utopia, particularly when every two patrician and priestly Hindu families breed a dozen hippies who swing to the twang of the beat melody. Yet Hinduism is eloquent in the most unlikely niches of Kathmandu's clerical and mercantile society. It is eloquent in Kathmandu's mass-addiction to the trend-setting Hindi movies. In this hippie capital of the world it is eloquent in the civilized cliches of the Radio Nepal, in the opaque journalese of the *Gorkhapatra*. It is eloquent in the strangled cry of the Nepali language which is groaning under the dead-weight of unpalatable Sanskritized Hindi. Above all, it is eloquent in all the pious social and religious processions in Kathmandu. For in Kathmandu all processions—except the funerals, march to the hit tunes of the trend-setting Hindi movies.

#### RHETORIC AND REALITY

If Kathmandu were the junkyard where time deposits all the relics of the receding civilizations, including the latest of the *homo sapiens*—the hippies, the most incongruous heap of the deposits is the Hindu ideologue. The Hindu ideologue is a romantic creature. He has just crept out of the Vedic caves, and is obstinately looking at the world with blinkered eyes. To him the world has not changed much since the Hindus fought at Kurukshetra. His romanticism is betrayed in his rhapsodic over-simplification of the complex ethnic-linguistic and sociological realities of Nepalese life. The Hindu journalists of Kathmandu parade mythic cliches to mask their ignorance of the Nepalese sociological realities. The first tribe who should go to the villages—the teeming villages of the Sherpas, Limbus, Rais, Tamangs, Gurungs, Dolpos, is the tribe of Hindu doctrinaires who formulate Nepalese values in terms of Vedic jargons. Let them see for themselves that the Nepalese societies are not monolithic and that no societies are further from the Vedic-Aryan or the Hindu-Brahmanical society of the Indo-Gangetic plains than the societies which characterize the interior

of Nepal. The research works like Dor Bahadur Bista's *People of Nepal*, Iman Singh Chemjong's *History and Culture of the Kirat People*, Gopal Singh Nepali's *The Newars*, S.K. Shrivastav's *The Tharus*, Furer-Haimendorf's *The Sherpas of Nepal*, John T. Hitchcock's *The Magars of Banyan Hill*, or the relevant works of Brian H. Hodgson, Dr David Snellgrove and others are never read by Kathmandu's insular Hindu journalists, partly because some of these are written by the *mlecchhas*, but mainly because they speak a barbarous tongue and speak of all unpalatable sociological realities. Kathmandu is not the whole Nepal. Its metaphysical absurdity lies precisely in its pretensions that it is. The primitive, animistic and elemental society of the Sherpas, for example, compels the sociologist to conclude that Hindu piety in Nepal is a rich fantasy largely anchored in Kathmandu—a child of the creative Indophile nostalgia of the Nepalese Hindus who wistfully trace their ancestry to one of the *gotras* of the Indian *rishis*. Kathmandu houses a great many of their descendants. As ancestor-worshippers they tell us that the Hindus are the most civilized and the purest of the Aryans, and that the Hindus had, once, excelled in every conceivable mode of human activity—from aircraft engineering and guided missiles to yoga, mysticism and metaphysics. Ask them and they will tell you that the roots of the Nepalese societies, both ethnic and cultural, are somewhere in the Indus Valley. Yet the irony of Nepalese history is that it was the Hindu priestly and patrician conspiracy of the Rana regime which had left the Nepalese people in a century of stagnation, breeding parasites at the top and all ignorance, superstition and poverty settling at the bottom. Today Hindu mysticism and metaphysics have little relevance in Kathmandu, the home of shop-keepers and clerks; Hindu rhetoric has much less relevance in the rest of the kingdom, the home of indigenous folk-lore and folk-cultures, of animism and primeval rites. In Kathmandu Hinduism has survived, not as a creative force, but as a fabric of fossilized

rites and rituals, feasts and festivals to which both the believers and the non-believers subscribe, not as an act of conscious faith, but as a matter of inherited habits.

In fact, even in India the rhetoric of Hindu spiritualism, like the rhetoric of the Old Testament prophets, was a product of the exile mind, perpetually at the mercy of the tyrannical tropical environment. Hindu spirituality was a metaphysical hill-station of the world-weary exiles. It was not for nothing that the ancient Hindu exiles came to the cooler foots of the Himalayas seeking a metaphysical asylum. The epic heroes of the *Mahabharata*, after gaining victory at Kurukshetra, had nowhere to go but the Hindu heaven, and significantly they chose the Himalayan passes as a way out to their Garden of Hesperides.

Today in India Hindu rhetoric has a pragmatic value as a political ideology or a party programme. But in Kathmandu vocal Hindu journalism sounds a little out of place, not only because the natural landscape is softer, the Himalayas closer, but also because the disguised sycophancy of the orthodox doctrinaires sounds frightfully out of touch with the country's socio-cultural realities. The socio-cultural realities of Nepal are not what these star-gazing doctrinaires have made out of them. They never see Nepal for themselves with the detachment or involvement of the social scientist. Scanning the country's dust is a much more salutary occupation than gazing at the stars through the Indophile lenses. The discrepancy between Kathmandu's Hindu journalism and the country's rich, indigenous and variegated folk-traditions is not just the classical antithesis between the town and the country: it is also the fatal inconsistency between rhetoric and reality.

#### WAITING FOR THE BEAST

Everything conspires to make Kathmandu a muddle, an absurd city, a city without walls, a city without a symbol. The muddle is both physical and metaphysical;

the incongruities are both material and cultural. Today at the heart of Kathmandu, from Jung Bahadur to Juddha Shumsher, all the Rana Prime Ministers stand in an undisturbed bronze repose and shed dark tears of satisfaction at the consummate perfection of their fantasy. Not that like Lazarus they rose from the dead. They had never been buried. Kathmandu does not bury its dead. Meanwhile, Kathmandu is flooded with the tourists who come to see this last stretch of the Orient, hoping to find it still bathed in the mystique of the forbidden city. But they go back to write books of disenchantment, telling the world that Kathmandu is waiting, not for tourists, nor for Messiahs, but for comedians, satirists and cartoonists. Of course, the Second Coming is not at hand; if it were the Beast slouching to be born in Kathmandu must be a Yahoo—a Cervantes, a Swift or a Hogarth.

Meanwhile, the streets of Kathmandu are thick with forebodings. The omniscient eyes of the Buddha are transfixed in a searching gaze upon Kathmandu your Kathmandu.

*October 9, 1967*

